

THE MUSEUM OF
OTHER PEOPLE

ALSO BY ADAM KUPER

Culture: The Anthropologists' Account

*Anthropology and Anthropologists:
The British School in the Twentieth Century*

The Reinvention of Primitive Society: Transformations of a Myth

Incest and Influence: The Private Life of Bourgeois England

THE
MUSEUM
OF OTHER
PEOPLE

ADAM KUPER

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‘There is no document of civilisation that is not
at the same time a document of barbarism.’

Walter Benjamin

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THE MUSEUM OF OTHER PEOPLE

Since at least the fifteenth century, Europe's 1 per cent collected Greek and Roman antiquities, Renaissance art and Chinese ceramics. Their gardens flaunted exotic trees. For entertainment, perhaps instruction, they had cabinets of 'natural curiosities' and 'artificial curiosities' with freaks of nature, bizarre devices, instruments of torture, titillating images.

In the last decades of the eighteenth century a few grand collections were put on public show. The venues came to be known as museums: shrines of the muses. At first only select visitors were admitted. The Hermitage insisted on court dress. The Louvre gave privileged access to artists. As late as 1808 anyone who wished to enter the British Museum had to submit a written application. Gradually more and more museums opened to the public, though children were not welcome.

In 1848 two Chinese scholars were dispatched to examine these new institutions. They reported that there were *jigulou*, 'buildings for collections of bones', *wanzhongyuan*, 'gardens of everything', *huage*, 'pavilions of paintings', *jibaoyuan*, 'courtyards of treasures', and *junqilou* 'houses of military equipment'. After visiting the British Museum, a Japanese delegation coined a new term, *hakubutsukan*, 'mansion of boundless things'.¹

This book tells the story of yet another kind of museum. Benoît de L'Estoile identified it as le musée de l'Autre. I call it the Museum of Other People.²

Conceived in the 1830s and 1840s, the Museum of Other People put on display an exotic world of 'primitive' or 'tribal' peoples who lived far away or long ago. Its golden age began

with the wave of European colonialism in Africa and Oceania in the 1880s. It then went into decline in the era of decolonisation in the 1960s. Museums of ethnology and anthropology in the USA followed a similar trajectory, emerging at the height of colonisation of the territories west of the Mississippi ('Indian country'), and giving way to identity museums in the 1980s. By the twenty-first century the Museum of Other People confronted a full-blown crisis. This may be terminal.

The first plans for the Museum of Other People were drawn up in Paris, Leiden, Copenhagen and Dresden. In 1845 the British Museum installed an ethnographic gallery. In 1846 the Smithsonian Institution in Washington DC established a department of ethnology. At the same time, societies of anthropologists and ethnologists were founded, part of a new wave of learned societies that were coming to terms with an industrialising, urbanising, imperialist Europe.

Governments assumed responsibility for education, poor relief, public health and policing (functions once left largely to parish authorities). For reasons of state and commerce, European powers began a new round of land grabs in faraway lands. Modernising bureaucracies found themselves in urgent need of facts and ideas. In 1836, Lord John Russell, who served twice as prime minister of Britain, declared: 'We are busy introducing system, method, science, economy, regularity [and] discipline'.³ A new breed of statisticians delivered the data. Positivists in France and Utilitarians in England proposed methods and theories – and a cluster of new sciences emerged. Michel Foucault called them human sciences, while admitting that he used the term 'sciences' loosely: 'the body of knowledge (though even that word is perhaps a little too strong; let us say, to be more neutral still ... the body of discourse) that takes as its object man as an empirical entity'.⁴

As the philosopher and historian of science Ian Hacking remarked, the new human sciences were *making up kinds of people*.⁵ Ethnologists and anthropologists began to investigate

the character, habits and customs of a very particular kind of people. Once known as savages, they were now, in a scientific era, identified as 'primitive': stuck in an early stage of human development. These primitive people were distinguished by their 'race', 'culture', or degree of 'civilisation', terms coined in the last decades of the eighteenth century.

Anthropologists distinguished populations by race. Ethnologists concerned themselves with culture or civilisation. However, disciplinary labels were expansive, overlapping and often a matter of contention. William Edwards, son of a Jamaican planter, who founded the *Société ethnologique de Paris* in 1839, claimed that the term ethnology had the double advantage that it lent itself to generalisation and 'designated indifferently the study of races or of peoples'.⁶ In 1843, James Cowles Prichard, author of the first English textbook in the field, defined ethnology as the study of the history of peoples, and laid down that it 'must be mainly founded on the relations of their languages'.⁷ In 1859, Paul Broca, a professor of anatomy at the Sorbonne, set up the *Société d'anthropologie de Paris*, the first learned society to adopt the title 'anthropology', an old term for the philosophical contemplation of the human condition. He dismissed the ethnologists as do-gooders, obsessed with slavery, their motivation not truly scientific. They were, he complained, deplorably reluctant to acknowledge the radical importance of biological differences.

Armed with eighteen signatures of potential members, Broca approached the Ministry of Public Education for permission to form his society. The minister hesitated. As a historian, Francis Schiller summed up official concerns: 'Worse than ethnology, which smacked only of anti-slavery, anthropology suggested subversion and the spirit of 1848; something vaguely degrading to man's immortal soul, possibly in conflict with the teachings of the Church and the interests of the Empire.' Permission was granted, but on two conditions: First, 'they must never talk politics or religion'. Second, 'a plainclothes officer of the Imperial Police must be present at each session and report

to headquarters'.⁸ (Broca enjoyed reminiscing about the time the attendant policeman asked whether he might be excused. 'There will be nothing interesting to-day, I suppose? May I go?' 'No, no, my friend,' Broca replied, 'you must not go for a walk; sit down and earn your pay.')⁹

In London too, ethnologists and anthropologists were at daggers drawn. In 1842 the Aborigines' Protection Society resolved that the best way to help native peoples was to study them.¹⁰ This was contentious. The missionary element in the society resisted. A year later the secretary of the APS, Richard King, and two Quaker physicians, Thomas Buxton and Thomas Hodgkin, formed the London Ethnological Society. The members were anti-slavery and committed to the doctrine that all human races had a common origin.

In 1863, in the heat of the American Civil War, a frankly racist faction broke away and set up the Anthropological Society of London. A year later its leader, James Hunt, published *On The Negro's Place in Nature*, in which he asserted the separate origin of the various human races and defended slavery. The inner circle of the Anthropological Society formed 'The Cannibal Club', which was called to order with a gavel carved in the shape of an African head.¹¹ Hunt was even more dismissive of the ethnologists than Broca had been. These 'opponents of comparative anthropology' suffered 'arrested brain growth' and 'from what I will call respectively the religious mania, and the rights-of-man mania'.¹²

Hunt died in 1869. In 1871, the year in which Darwin's *The Descent of Man* was published, the feuding London societies merged under the leadership of Thomas Henry Huxley, John Lubbock and General Augustus Lane-Fox (later Pitt Rivers). They were all Darwinians. Indeed, one commentator complained that the new society promised to be 'little more than a sort of Darwinian club'.¹³ The choice of a name for the society was a final bone of contention. Lubbock, intervening in a heated debate at the British Association for the Advancement of Science, said that he 'looked upon anthropology as an ugly name for ethnology

... [Ethnology] was an older word and a prettier word than anthropology'.¹⁴ But after much heart-searching, and despite a rearguard action by the fervently anti-racist Lady Lubbock, the new association was named 'Anthropological'.¹⁵

Museums of Civilisation (the Louvre, the British Museum, New York's Metropolitan Museum) embodied the Enlightenment theory of history. All human societies progress from a lower to a higher condition, some more quickly than others. Progress can be measured by the advance of reason in its cosmic battle against raw nature, instinct, superstition and traditional authority. The goal towards which all must travel is what French philosophers in the late eighteenth century began to call *Civilisation*. Civilisation had three peaks: ancient Greece and Rome, the European Renaissance, and, well, obviously, the great city in which is found the premier Museum of Civilisation – Paris, or London, or New York. The antithesis of civilisation, its foil, was represented by 'Stone Age' or 'primitive' societies. Their crude arts and artefacts belonged in a Museum of Other People, if not in a Museum of Natural History.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, the English philosopher Herbert Spencer proposed that societies were like living organisms. As they 'evolve' they become more complex and efficient. The term 'evolution' duly entered the vocabulary of speculative historians, alongside 'progress' and 'civilisation'. Spencer's 'evolution' was, however, radically different from Darwin's theory of natural selection. Darwin repudiated the idea that the development of natural organisms, let alone societies, follow the same path everywhere. Challenges are local and changeable. Particular adaptations cannot be foreseen. Outcomes are unpredictable. 'What a chance it has been ... that has made a man,' Darwin mused. 'Any monkey probably might, with such chances be made intellectual, but almost certainly not made into man.'¹⁶

Yet Darwin pointed out that as human beings became tool-makers they were less exposed to a changing environment. Gradually they developed the means to engineer their own progress. At that point, Darwin did buy into the civilisation

narrative. He wrote, in *The Descent of Man*, that ‘man has risen, though by slow and interrupted steps, from a lowly condition to the highest standard as yet attained by him in knowledge, morals and religion’.¹⁷ And while he hated slavery, Darwin believed that there was a hierarchy of races. ‘It is very true what you say about the higher races of men, when high enough, replacing & clearing off the lower races,’ he wrote to the Christian Socialist, Charles Kingsley, in 1862. ‘In 500 years how the Anglo-saxon race will have spread & exterminated whole nations; & in consequence how much the Human race, viewed as a unit, will have risen in rank.’¹⁸

In 1871 the father figure of English anthropology, E. B. Tylor, wrote in his *Primitive Culture*: ‘The educated world of Europe and America practically settles a standard by simply placing its own nations at one end of the social series and savage tribes at the other, arranging the rest of mankind between these limits according as they correspond more closely to savage or to cultured life.’¹⁹ Perhaps Tylor was being ironic, but this way of thinking had an obvious appeal to imperialists, though not necessarily to the foreigners over whom they ruled.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, as European powers were busily assembling tropical empires in Africa and Oceania, most Europeans were themselves living under imperial rule, subjects of the Austro-Hungarian, the Ottoman or the Russian empires. Central European intellectuals invoked the notion of *Kultur* to challenge the imperialist cult of *Civilisation*.²⁰ The identity of a *Volk* derived from its particular culture. This was rooted in blood and soil, fitted to a local environment. The *Volksgeist*, the national spirit, found expression in rituals, folk tales, music and crafts. Appeals to a universal civilisation were imperialist propaganda. There was no hierarchy of cultures, no universal historical dialectic leading peoples everywhere onwards and upwards to a civilised condition. ‘What does “progress of the human race” mean?’, demanded Johann Gottfried von Herder. ‘How are we to measure so many different periods and peoples, even with the best of outside information?’²¹

Proponents of local culture feared that their very identity was threatened by foreign powers and the insidious appeal of modernity. Suspicious of science, industry and commerce, they looked to the past for reassurance and inspiration. Champions of civilisation were full of optimism, confident of moving forward, making progress, certain that they were on the side of history. Civilisation trumped barbarism. Progress had its costs, no doubt, but resistance was futile.

And yet the opposed poles of Tylor's series – 'savage or cultured life' – do not correspond to objective, readily specified historical conditions. Remarkably little is known about the way of life and beliefs of hunter-gatherers in Upper Palaeolithic times. We cannot say with any confidence what these societies had in common, apart from a dependence on hunting and gathering. (Who knows whether they had families, leaders, shamans, music?) Since they were first documented, pastoral nomads and many foraging peoples associated with farmers and even with city folk, and had done so for many generations, in some cases for millennia. Far from being very like the ancient Stone Age peoples who lived in a world of hunters and gatherers, they have more in common with their farming neighbours than with foragers and herders in other parts of the world.

'Civilisation', the Enlightenment antithesis to savagery or barbarism, is almost as hard to pin down. The term was applied at first to ancient Greece and Rome. In the nineteenth century, European scholars extended its range to include ancient Egypt and Israel, Babylon, Persia, China, Japan and Moghul India. Yet while all civilised peoples, ancient and modern, are assumed to share common features, there is little agreement about which features are decisive. 'No civilised society would – ' Fill in the blank according to taste.

In 1883, the English historian J. R. Seeley remarked that civilisation was associated with all sorts of conditions – 'sometimes the softening of manners, sometimes mechanical inventions, sometimes religious toleration, sometimes the appearance of great poets and artists, sometimes scientific discoveries,

sometimes constitutional liberty'. However, these qualities did not necessarily occur together. Nor were they produced by a single cause. And 'civilisation' certainly did not explain, let alone excuse, the remarkable expansion of the British Empire. ('We seem, as it were, to have conquered and peopled half the world in a fit of absence of mind,' Seeley famously remarked.)²²

Britain's medals to honour veterans of the First World War were inscribed 'The Great War for Civilisation 1914–1919': but after the horrors of that war, the differences between civilisation and barbarism seemed less apparent. The father figure of American anthropology, Franz Boas, wrote in 1928:

Anyone who has lived with primitive tribes, who has shared their joys and sorrows, their privations and their luxuries ... will agree that there is no such thing as a 'primitive mind', a 'magical' or 'prelogical' way of thinking, but that each individual in 'primitive' societies is a man, a woman, a child of the same way of thinking, feeling and acting as a man, woman or child in our own society.²³

Yet even in this passage Boas wrote unselfconsciously about 'primitive tribes'. The idea of a primitive kind of people still cast a long shadow when I was a graduate student of social anthropology at Cambridge University in the 1960s. British, French and Belgium colonies in Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific were in the process of becoming independent states. And yet we were given to understand that out there, in the tropics and the antipodes, in countries that had until very recently been European colonies, functioning tribes could still be studied. To be sure, those people were now mostly Christians or Muslims. Their children went to school. But perhaps a residue of the old system could be discerned. Despite missionary disapproval, people sacrificed to their ancestors and tabooed animal totems. Tribal chiefs insisted on traditional prerogatives, even if they had to be propped up in office by colonial commissioners. Everyone had access to money and markets, and yet they practised barter and gift exchange.

Anthropologists did adapt to the post-colonial world. They dropped the fantasy of bounded tribes, each with its pristine culture, and began to study globalisation, hybrid religions, ethnic relations, urban life, the legacy of colonial structures. Some were drawn into projects of 'modernisation' or 'development' in the newly independent states. The description 'primitive' was avoided. 'Indigenous' might be preferred, though that term was applied to the same roll call of hunters and pastoral nomads whom the Victorians regarded as prototypical primitives.

Meanwhile, the Museum of Other People remained stuck in its ways. In 1969, William C. Sturtevant, long-serving curator of North American ethnology in the Smithsonian Institution in Washington DC, asked his colleagues 'to admit the minuscule role and the low prestige of museum work in present-day ethnology'.²⁴ This was fair enough. Many museums continued to purvey timeless images of exotic ways of life (dioramas of waxwork figures hunting, praying, carving, weaving, cooking and sitting around camp fires). The mood music was no longer imperialist, however. Exhibitions communicated a benevolent universalism. Look at funeral practices around the world, beliefs in spiritual beings, music, dance, initiation rituals. See what we all have in common!

The prototype was the blockbuster 'Family of Man' photographic show that travelled the world in the 1950s. Even at the time it was derided as a happy-clappy, all-in-it-together, Kumbaya *family* show. The critic Roland Barthes pointed out the ambiguity of its message:

the difference between human morphologies is asserted, exoticism is insistently stressed, the infinite variations of the species, the diversity in skins, skulls and customs are made manifest, the image of Babel is complacently projected over that of the world. Then, from this pluralism, a type of unity is magically produced: man is born, works, laughs and dies everywhere in the same way ... Of course

this means postulating a human essence, and here God is re-introduced into our Exhibition.²⁵

'The Family of Man' was a huge success. It helped that the United States Information Agency funded a tour through thirty-seven countries that attracted over 7.5 million visitors.

The Museum of Other People gradually lost its moorings, drifting away from the new centres of research in anatomy, anthropology, archaeology, linguistics and history of art. In the 1920s and 1930s, ethnographers began to do long-term field-work. Studying social and cultural processes, drawing on a range of social science theories, they lost interest in what came to be called 'material culture' – the sort of things to be found in the museums. In the second half of the twentieth century, racist, typological thinking was replaced by a statistically based population genetics. There was no longer a good reason to display skulls and skeletons. Yet while the old paradigms were abandoned in the universities, they had a half-life still in the museums, where dusty showcases and dioramas continued to purvey timeless images of exotic ways of life.

In the 1960s the Museum of Other People sailed into troubled waters. European colonies in Africa and Oceania became independent states. Indigenous peoples' movements emerged in the Americas and in Australia and New Zealand. In the late twentieth century, identity museums along the Mall in Washington DC called into question the very idea of a Museum of Other People. Curators of ethnographic and prehistoric artefacts were thrown, unprepared, into a cauldron of controversy about race, colonialism, cultural appropriation and the very nature of scientific authority. And to cap it all, by the twenty-first century they were themselves in the dock, charged with sequestering other peoples' heirlooms.

'The trustees of the British Museum have become the world's largest receivers of stolen property, and the great majority of their loot is not even on public display,' claims Geoffrey

Robertson QC, a human rights lawyer.²⁶ Dan Hicks, a senior curator at Oxford's Pitt Rivers Museum, insists that European museums must atone for their colonial past, transform themselves into 'sites of conscience' and 'take action to make the 2020s a decade of restitution'.²⁷

An activist theatre group 'BP or not BP' (a reference not only to Hamlet but to British Petroleum, a controversial donor) runs 'stolen goods tours' of the British Museum. An Australian Aborigine man, resident in London, demands the return of a shield that was taken by Captain Cook in 1770. He claims that 250 years ago it belonged to his own ancestor, a warrior identified by Cook as Cooman. Next up, a woman introduced as a Maori calls on the museum to return 2,300 Maori artefacts. Then a British man with Greek Cypriot parents testifies that the Elgin Marbles belong back in Athens.

In a superhero film released in 2018, *Black Panther*, a visitor from a fictional African country, Erik 'Killmonger' Stevens (played by Michael B. Jordan), confronts a curator in the 'Museum of Great Britain'. He tells her that a seventh-century war hammer on display with other African artefacts is wrongly labelled. It wasn't made in Benin. The British took it from his own people, the Wakanda. Now he is going to take it back. She protests that it isn't for sale. 'How do you think your ancestors got these?', he replies. 'Do you think they paid a fair price? Or did they take it ... like they took everything else?' Killmonger poisons the curator's coffee, kills the guards, and makes off with the hammer.

Iconic museum pieces were acquired by force or shady dealing in the heyday of European imperialism, usually from rival empires. Famous examples are the Elgin Marbles, the Rosetta Stone and Qing dynasty treasures looted from the Chinese emperor's summer palace, which together are the pride of the British Museum.²⁸ (Even the word loot was appropriated. It comes from *lut*, the Hindi word for plunder.)

A corps of scientists accompanied Napoleon's military expedition to Egypt in 1798. They carried off antiquities, a number

of which – including the Rosetta Stone – were seized by a British expeditionary force, shipped to London in a captured French frigate, *L'Égyptienne*, and ended up in the British Museum. In 1812, Lord Elgin, British ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, arranged for half the surviving sculptures of the Parthenon to be removed and sent to his private home in England. 'Bonaparte has not got such a thing from all his thefts in Italy,' he boasted.²⁹ In 1816 he sold his trophies to the British Museum. The imperial summer palace in the north of Beijing was plundered and then razed to the ground by British and French troops in October 1860 in revenge for the capture and torture of thirty-nine Europeans during the Second Opium War, only eighteen of whom survived. When the looting began, the soldiers were given a free hand. About one and a half million precious objects were taken from the palace complex. A great many found their way into European and North American museums.³⁰ The whole forty-acre imperial estate was then torched on the orders of the British high commissioner to China, Lord Elgin (son of the Lord Elgin of the Elgin Marbles). 'We, Europeans, we are the civilised, and for us, the Chinese are the barbarians,' Victor Hugo wrote to a correspondent. 'Now see what civilisation has done to barbarism ... One day I hope that France will return these spoils of war to China, cleansed and polished.'³¹

'Throughout history, soldiers have claimed the spoils of war, and the plunder and sacking of cities has been as common as the practice of forcibly requisitioning food from the countryside,' according to Sir Richard Evans, regius professor of modern history at Cambridge University.³² Not only was looting a common accessory to warfare: it was regarded as right and natural. In his classic account of the laws of war and peace, published in 1625, the Dutch jurist Hugo Grotius recognised 'the right to appropriate for oneself what one has taken from the enemy'.³³

Napoleon Bonaparte elevated looting to a patriotic duty. Following the example of the Roman Triumphs, he ritualised

his appropriations. In 1798, on the anniversary of the fall of Robespierre and the end of the Terror, Paris celebrated a two-day 'Festival of Liberty and Triumphant Entry of Objects of the Sciences and the Arts Collected in Italy'. Among the prizes on show were four gilded Corinthian horses that a Crusader force seized from the Hippodrome in Constantinople in 1204 and carried off to Venice. French soldiers removed the horses from the porch of the cathedral of St Mark and they were paraded through Paris beneath a banner that read: 'Horses transported from Corinth to Rome, and from Rome to Constantinople to Venice, and from Venice to France. They are finally on free soil.' A song written for the occasion had a refrain: 'Rome is no more in Rome/It is all in Paris.'³⁴

Much of the plunder of Napoleon's campaigns ended up in the Louvre, renamed the Musée Napoléon in 1803. After the Battle of Waterloo, the Duke of Wellington insisted that the victorious allies 'could not do otherwise than restore [works of art] to the countries from which, contrary to the practice of civilised warfare, they had been torn during the disastrous period of the French Revolution and the tyranny of Buonaparte'.³⁵ Richard Evans notes, however, that 'only about 55 per cent of the looted objects were returned; the rest had been sent out to provincial museums, beyond the ken of the occupying Allied armies'.³⁶

The Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907 were the first international instruments to ban pillage. This in no way inhibited the Nazis from plundering masterpieces from museums and from Jewish families. As a young man Hitler dreamt of being an artist. In his last years, in the midst of a world war, he was planning a Führermuseum, to be built in Linz, near his birthplace in Austria. It would be a museum of looted art.

Following the defeat of Nazi Germany, the US imposed a temporary embargo on trade in works of art and set up a mechanism for the collection and return of stolen goods (but that did not prevent Soviet troops from carting away truckloads of antiquities and works of art). Discussions in the United Nations and UNESCO led to the promulgation of the 1954 Hague

Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict. At the time of writing, 133 states are party to the convention. (The United States signed up only in 2009, and insisted on a waiver where nuclear weapons are deployed.)

This convention affirms that institutional and individual owners of stolen works of art (and their descendants) have the right to reclaim them, but it can be very difficult to recover treasures looted by the Nazis. 'In many cases, the original owners were dead, and sometimes their heirs had been killed by the Nazis as well,' writes Evans, an authority on the Third Reich.

Entire families perished in very large numbers at Auschwitz, and while institutions, museums and galleries possessed the knowledge, the resources and the evidence to mount actions to try and regain what they had lost, the same was seldom true of individuals. As a result the number of restitution actions and claims fell sharply during the 1950s, at the same time as new international agreements protecting cultural property came into force.³⁷

UNESCO's 1970 Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property urged buyers to require proof that antiquities were acquired legally. The United States ratified the treaty in 1983, but it took Britain until 2002 and Germany until 2007 to sign it. In the meantime, countries rich in antiquities – Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria – were ravaged by invasions and civil wars. Rare and wonderful pieces soon appeared on the world market.³⁸

Reviewing international conventions governing the ownership of 'cultural property' (which he defined as 'objects of artistic, archaeological, ethnological or historical interest'), the jurist John Henry Merryman distinguished two opposing points of view.³⁹ One school of thought treats cultural property as a shared endowment of humanity. Merryman dubbed this the cosmopolitan principle. An example is the preamble to the

Hague Convention of 1954, which states that ‘damage to cultural property belonging to any people whatsoever means damage to the cultural heritage of all mankind, since each people makes its contribution to the culture of the world’. The other approach is nationalist. This underpins the UNESCO Convention on Cultural Property. The thrust here is on the retention of cultural property within national boundaries.

Whether nationalist or cosmopolitan, the status of these international conventions is uncertain. The International Court of Justice has not tested whether there is a duty under international law to return ‘cultural property’ even if it was illegally acquired. James Cuno, president and CEO of the J. Paul Getty Trust and former director of the Harvard Art Museums, the Courtauld Institute and the Art Institute of Chicago, is disparaging. ‘It wouldn’t be an exaggeration to see these many conventions as a bouillabaisse of good intentions and bureaucratic ambitions,’ he writes, ‘all of which are, in the end, unenforceable, except insofar as the States Parties themselves have imposed internal laws and sanctions governing the activities addressed by the Conventions.’⁴⁰

Some national legislatures did institute procedures for restitution. In New Zealand, Australia and Canada laws were introduced to protect the heritage of native minorities. In 1990 the US Congress passed the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA). This provided a legal framework for the repatriation of Native American human remains and ceremonial objects held by museums. And social movements around the world demanded redress for the injuries of slavery and colonialism.

In July 2013, the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter kick-started perhaps the largest protest movement in the history of the USA.⁴¹ The killing of George Floyd by a police officer in Minneapolis on 25 May 2020 sparked massive demonstrations in nearly 550 locations across the United States. Halls of residence, lecture theatres and libraries donated to universities by slave owners were renamed. In June 2020, the statue of Edward Colson, a

philanthropist who profited from the Atlantic slave trade, was toppled and thrown into Bristol harbour.

A spotlight then turned on museum collections, and in particular on West African court art that had been looted by British and French armies in the 1890s. In August 2016, the newly elected president of the Republic of Bénin, Patrice Talon, demanded that France restore trophies looted by a French expeditionary force in 1894 from the ancient kingdom of Dahomey. France's Foreign Ministry made the customary response: objects deposited in French museums are inalienable national possessions. However, on 28 November 2017, during a visit to Burkina Faso, the newly elected president of France, Emmanuel Macron tweeted: 'African heritage cannot be held prisoner by European museums.'

Macron's intervention resonated with a general shift in public attitudes to race and imperialism. Veteran staff at the British Museum recalled with horror the campaign for the return of the Elgin Marbles to Athens launched in 1982 by the Greek film actress, Melina Mercouri, her country's minister of culture. But Macron's démarche was more troubling, its potential constituency larger and more radical. The cultural establishment was thrown off balance. Some museum directors were dismissive. Others issued pious mission statements. A few proclaimed their solidarity, but did not undertake to surrender prized collections.

Parodying Macron's tweet, the former head of the Musée du quai Branly in Paris, Stéphane Martin, declared that 'museums should not be held hostage to the painful history of colonialism'.⁴² He pointed out that one of the items demanded by the Republic of Bénin, a statue of the Dahomey god Gou that is in the Louvre, was sculpted by a man from a neighbouring country while he was a prisoner of the Dahomey king. The statue was found on a beach by a French sailor. Exhibited in the Louvre for 150 years it became an icon of modernism, revered by Picasso and Apollinaire.⁴³ Nevertheless, Martin came out in favour of the 'circulation' of artefacts between museums. He added that African governments should be urged to treat curators with respect and pay them decent salaries.

Directors of other European museums were more diplomatic. Harmut Dorlech, the director-general of the Humboldt Forum in Berlin, promised that in future, labels would contextualise colonial artefacts and reveal their sometimes troubling provenance. 'This will be done in a manner that displays the power relations between the colonists who brought the objects to Germany and the colonised,' he declared.⁴⁴ The British Museum moved the bust of its founder, Sir Hans Sloane, from a pedestal near the entrance to a cabinet in the newly unveiled Enlightenment Hall. A text identifies him as a 'slave owner' whose work was 'enabled by the wealth and networks that grew out of European imperialism'. 'The British Museum has done a lot of work – accelerated and enlarged its work on its own history, the history of empire, the history of colonialism, and also of slavery,' the museum's director, Hartwig Fischer, assured the *Daily Telegraph*. 'We must not hide anything. Healing is knowledge.'⁴⁵ In June 2020 he posted a pledge on the museum's website: 'The British Museum stands in solidarity with the British Black community, with the African American community, with the Black community throughout the world. We are aligned with the spirit and soul of Black Lives Matter everywhere.' And yet President Macron's initiative 'does not change the policy of the British Museum, nor legislation in Great Britain,' Fischer told *The New York Times*. The British Museum's trustees were of course open to all forms of cooperation. Nevertheless, 'the collections have to be preserved as a whole'.⁴⁶

Imperial wars cast a long shadow over collecting activities in the colonial era. The argument is sometimes made that because there was a great disparity of resources between local people and foreign collectors, all acquisitions made by Europeans during the colonial period should be considered illegitimate. Ample evidence might be adduced in support of this syllogism. The ethnographer and surrealist poet, Michel Leiris, while serving as secretary to a collecting expedition under the auspices of the National Ethnographic Museum in Paris, wrote, in a letter to his

wife in September 1931: 'We pilfer from the Africans under the pretext of teaching others how to love them and get to know their culture, that is, when all is said and done, to train even more ethnographers, so they can head off to encounter them and "love and pilfer" from them as well.' And yet, Leiris noted in his diary, 'even if we force them a little to turn over their objects (threatening them, for example, with the authority of the colonial administration), in the end it will not be to their disadvantage.' And after all, 'we paid for almost everything'.⁴⁷

But blanket condemnation of all transactions in the age of empire downplays local agency. Collectors were typically drawn into established systems of exchange. Leiris parodied this, imagining a scenario in which Europeans trade carnival masks in order to acquire masks of native gods for museums back home, only to find that the natives begin to trade in European masks and open their own museum of exotic crafts.⁴⁸

Jenny Newell, co-manager of the Pacific collection at the Australian Museum in Sydney, cites an eighteenth-century account by the surgeon of a convict transport of what happened when his ship docked in a Polynesian port:

Once the ship had come properly to anchor, the chiefly family of the region would go aboard, or arrange to meet the captain and officers on shore. Chiefs and their families would bring high-value gifts: items of regalia, large rolls of decorated tapa, ornaments, pigs and fruit that were specifically intended for establishing connections rather than the more common practice of barter. These people of rank would, after assessing the status and wealth of the crew members, select an appropriate taio [friend] each. They would wrap him in cloth, sometimes place a taumi (warrior's gorget of feathers and shark's teeth) around his neck and hand him other significant objects until, as one officer reported, he could be close to fainting from the heat and weight of them.

‘With taio bonds established at all levels of the ship and the community on shore, the commodity and gift-exchanges would continue throughout the ship’s stay,’ Newell adds. ‘Tahitians would at times ask the ships’ carpenters to make up wooden chests in which to store the important goods they had collected.’ She cites George Tobin, a young lieutenant on Captain Bligh’s *Providence* voyage, who remarked, after visiting Tahiti in 1792: ‘they have at O’tahytey their Collectors, and their cabinets of European curiosities’.⁴⁹

A handsome young aristocrat from an island near Tahiti, Omai, accompanied Captain Cook and Joseph Banks back to England in 1774, at the end of Cook’s second Pacific voyage. Omai was presented to King George III, who made him an allowance and set him up in lodgings. His portrait was painted by Joshua Reynolds. A play about his life was performed at the Theatre Royal in Convent Garden. He was fêted in polite society, his courtesy and elegance widely admired. The very short-sighted Dr Johnson told Boswell that when he dined with Omai and a British politician, Lord Mulgrave, one evening, ‘they sat with their backs to the light fronting me, so that I could not see distinctly; and there was so little of the savage in Omai, that I was afraid to speak to either, lest I should mistake one for the other.’⁵⁰

Omai returned to his home island of Raiatea in 1777 with a horse, armour and some curiosities. He set up a museum. ‘The helmet, and some other parts of armour, with several cutlasses, are still preserved, and displayed on the sides of the house now standing on the spot where Mai’s dwelling was erected by Captain Cook,’ a missionary reported forty years after Omai’s death. ‘A few of the trinkets, such as a jack-in-a-box, a kind of serpent that darts out of a cylindrical case when the lid is removed, are preserved with care by one of the principal chiefs, who at the time of our arrival considered them great curiosities, and exhibited them, as a mark of his condescension, to particular favourites.’⁵¹ Meanwhile, back in London, Joseph Banks donated to the British Museum a ‘very large Collection

of Artificial Curiosities Utencils, dresses &c. from the South-Sea Islands'.⁵²

Dr Newell also tells the story of Hitihiti, a young Society Islander, who accompanied Captain Cook on his second voyage as a translator and guide. When the ship visited Easter Island, Hitihiti exchanged Tahitian tapa cloths for carvings of human figures, 'assuring us they would be greatly valued at Taheitee'. He gave a life-size carved hand with long fingernails to the expedition's senior naturalist, Johann Reinhold Forster, who passed it on to the British Museum. It is now on display in the Enlightenment Gallery.⁵³

A number of familiar anecdotes are cited to illustrate the bad faith of collectors in European colonies. Typical is the story of how colonial authorities in Nigeria apprehended Leo Frobenius, a prolific collector for German museums, when he was caught substituting a copy for an original Ife head.⁵⁴ Yet how representative are such examples? 'Some objects were undoubtedly stolen and taken by force,' writes Enid Schildkraut, who has studied collections made in the early twentieth century by Leo Frobenius, Emil Torday, a Hungarian ethnographer, and an American anthropologist, Frederick Starr. She points out, however, that

often the most active collectors hung around, sometimes (as in the case of Torday) learning African languages, drinking, smoking, and dancing with Africans to convince them to exchange their objects for imported goods. Even when these collectors moved rapidly from village to village ... or worked through local middlemen, as most did, they had to establish some rapport to extract the objects they were looking for.⁵⁵

In the colonial period, collectors engaged with local people who were soon all too familiar with European interests. Some were shrewd traders. In November 1905, Frederick Starr recorded in

his diary an attempt to buy esoteric items from an old man in a Congolese village:

Afterward he showed the other bundle which contained a purplish mass. This had lost its efficacy so we proposed its purchase, a proposition that was promptly blocked by one of those present. After some little argument a small fetish figure was brought out and to show us how it was used the palm-oil bottle and cam-wood were produced: they were mixed in the palm and then carefully rubbed over the whole figure, suitable observations being addressed to it all the time. When the act had been gone through with we talked price; I finally offered 1½ francs for it alone or 2 in case the old man stood greasing it while we photographed him; he took the latter. This fetish he told us was for success in hunting.⁵⁶

In a book published in 1907 Frobenius described bargaining for curios in the Congo:

Slowly the tall sons of the Kukengo State approached and offered their ethnological stuff [*ethnologischen Kram*] for sale. I had sent my people into the country to invite the Bakuba and they came. But when they sell, the Bakuba are truly the worst Greeks. They begin by asking prices that are unheard of and don't bargain much. Then someone brings the same object and haggles over it such that the Ethnologist needs all his patience and passion for valuable collections in order to endure this ordeal. But in order to be able to acquire more I first had to pay higher prices and initially had to let much blood.⁵⁷

The reference to blood-letting may not have been meant literally, but Frobenius was prepared to use force, particularly when it came to recruiting bearers, and he travelled with an intimidating private escort of 'police soldiers'.⁵⁸

By the 1920s, trained ethnographers were embedded in faraway villages for months and years at a time, doing their best to fit in. Gregory Bateson and his wife Margaret Mead did fieldwork in New Guinea in the 1920s and 1930s. Bateson recalled that:

in one of the big villages of the Sepik River headhunters, I was negotiating to buy a specially fine pair of secret flutes – highly decorated bamboo tubes, about 6 feet long and giving deep organ notes. The members of the clan which owned the flutes had two objections to the sale: ‘If you take these flutes away to your country *women* may see them,’ and ‘The flutes will never make music again. Who will know how to play them?’ On the subject of women, I assured them – ‘No New Guinea women shall see the flutes and any women in my country who may see them will not know what they are.’ To the other objection my only reply was to take some lessons in flute playing.⁵⁹

Melville Herskovits, a pioneer of African American studies, did fieldwork in the late 1920s among the Saramaka Maroons in a Dutch colony in South America, now the Republic of Suriname. He recalled that just as he prepared to depart:

I was getting into the dugout canoe that I was to take for a final run through the rapids that lay between the base camp and the railhead. My field kit, my notes, my collection of carvings and specimens were being stowed away. I was saying my goodbyes. At that moment, an old woman came up to me. In her hands she held a fine food-stirring paddle, which I had tried in vain to buy from her earlier. ‘White man,’ she said, ‘take this. Ayobo made it for me before I came to live with him in his village. Put it in the big house, in your white man’s country, where you told me beautiful things are kept. And write on a piece of paper that Ayobo made it.’⁶⁰



A trader sets out craft items for sale in the town of Ibantshe, in what is now the Kasai Province of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Leo Frobenius, who took the photograph during his 1904–6 expedition to the Congo Free State, complained that the prices charged by Kuba traders were far higher than he had expected. (By permission of the Frobenius Museum, University of Frankfurt. Image: FoA 01–2229)

The focus on the colonial period is arguably misleading. According to Maureen Murphy, a historian of African art at the Sorbonne, '70 per cent of the works preserved outside the continent "departed" after independence in the 1960s'.⁶¹ Corruption, civil unrest and local wars fuel smuggling. John Picton recalls how during the Biafran war in the late 1960s, federal Nigerian soldiers looted Igbo sculptures 'which ended up as trophies fixed to the fronts of military vehicles, while much else found its way into the international market'.⁶²

Christian and Islamic evangelists in Africa have instituted periodic purges of Satanic images. Marxist regimes in some West African countries banned polytheistic cults. (For instance, *Voudou* was banned in the Republic of Bénin from 1970 to 1990.) Each time, a surge of exports of antiquities followed.⁶³

Iconoclasm may bring about even more serious losses than smuggling. In February 2001 the Taliban leader, Mullah Omar, decreed the destruction of pre-Islamic monuments and figurative art works in Afghanistan. In March, two monumental statues of the Buddha carved into a cliffside in Bamiyan between AD 570 and 618 were blown up. A team of Taliban inspectors then visited the National Museum in Kabul and ordered the curators to open locked cabinets of antiquities. 'Here were drawers of extraordinary Bactrian artifacts and Ghandara heads and figurines,' writes Kwame Anthony Appiah. 'My friends recall the dead look in a curator's eyes as he described how the Taliban inspectors responded to these extraordinary artifacts by taking out mallets and pulverizing them in front of him.'⁶⁴

Modern art is also anathema to some authoritarian and clerical regimes. In the 1970s, when the Shah of Iran was in his pomp, courtesy of a boom in oil prices, his wife, Farah Pahlavi, went on a museum-building spree. Her signature project was the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art. A team of curators was despatched to New York and Paris to buy works by great modernists including Picasso, Van Gogh, Pollock, Warhol and de Kooning. Among the more controversial paintings were *Gabrielle With Open Blouse*, 1907, by Renoir, and Bacon's 1968

triptych, *Two Figures Lying on a Bed With Attendants*. (The naked figures, both male, are posed facing one another.) Orientalist images included such challenging examples as Derain's *L'Age d'or*, an exercise in primitivism that featured androgynous, semi-naked figures play-fighting with wild animals.

A former curator of the Tehran museum, Roxane Zand, comments that here was 'a major institution actually reflecting a reverse process, a reverse colonialism or reappropriation'.⁶⁵ Iran's sudden openness to international movements in the arts was certainly remarkable. But everything changed when a fundamentalist regime came to power in 1979. Artistic representations, critical literature, even ancient texts were condemned as sacrilegious. In 1989, Ayatollah Khomeini issued a fatwa ordering Muslims to kill Salman Rushdie because his novel, *The Satanic Verses*, was blasphemous. Iranian politicians then joined a clamour over satirical cartoons featuring the prophet Muhammad that were published by the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* in 2005.⁶⁶ And the collection of the Contemporary Art Museum was shut away in a high-security vault. (It is now estimated to be worth £2.5 billion.)⁶⁷

Shortly before the Islamic Revolution, the Shah had been negotiating with the British Museum for the loan of the Cyrus Cylinder, a clay cylinder inscribed with an account of the conquest of Babylon by Cyrus in 539 BCE. The new regime carried on with the negotiations. Some Iranian politicians even claimed that the Cylinder, excavated in Babylon in 1879, rightfully belonged to Iran, and demanded its permanent return. In 2010, following lengthy negotiations, a loan was agreed. The director of the British Museum, Neil MacGregor, claimed this as a diplomatic triumph. But there was an outcry in Iran because the ancient artefact shed a glorious light on a pre-Islamic dynasty. The director of the national museum was imprisoned.

Despite cautionary tales about smuggling, theft, iconoclasm, censorship and neglect, the force is with those who demand the restitution of colonial collections. The director of a major

European museum told me that her younger curators are convinced that every questionable piece in the collections should be 'returned'. Yet it may not be a simple matter to restore antique works of art, or even to identify who might be their rightful owners, or reliable custodians. Do people who share a 'culture' (whatever that might mean), have collective rights in historical artefacts that date back centuries? Do museums that preserved and displayed foreign artefacts for a century or more retain no legitimate claim to them?

'There have been bad arguments on both sides' when it comes to Lord Elgin's Athenian booty, in the judgement of Mary Beard. 'Politicians have leapt on and off the bandwagon. Successive Greek governments have found the loss of the Parthenon sculptures a convenient symbol of national unity, and demands for their restitution a low-cost and relatively risk-free campaign.' Difficult questions of principle are at stake: 'to whom does the Parthenon, and other such world-class monuments, belong? Should cultural treasures be repatriated, or should museums be proud of their international holdings? Is the Parthenon a special case – and why?'⁶⁸

By the 2020s pressure was building. The Smithsonian Institution in Washington DC and the Horniman Museum in London announced that they would return Benin Bronzes to Nigeria. There may even be a deal in the making to settle Athens's claim on the Parthenon Marbles in the British Museum. At a meeting of UNESCO in May 2021, 'every country there ganged up against the UK', *The Times* reported. A poll published by YouGov in November 2021 revealed that 59 per cent of British respondents believed that the Parthenon statues should be returned to Greece (18 per cent wanted them to stay in Britain. 22 per cent were don't knows). However, while Greece wanted acknowledgement of its 'ownership' of the marbles, Jonathan Williams, deputy director of the British Museum, preferred talk of loans. 'There are many wonderful things we'd be delighted to borrow and lend,' he said. 'It is what we do.'⁶⁹

While demands for restitution command the headlines, the crisis of the Museum of Other People is also, perhaps yet more fundamentally, an intellectual crisis. The museum is charged with disseminating racist and imperialist propaganda. Even if that broad-brush indictment may be countered, relativised or put into historical context, more insidious questions must still be addressed. Can we (Europeans, let us say) grasp the world view, the rituals, the customs, the arts of people with whom, it may seem, we have little in common, and who have reason to suspect us of racism, or at least condescension? Can we, should we, translate their ideas into our own terms? Some argue that the very act of observing and classifying others is a power play. If that is so, it may be impossible, in good faith, to undertake ethnographic research. But would you accept a stranger's self-representation on trust? After all, how many English people are able to provide reliable information on their country's history, literature, arts or religions?

Then there is the most challenging question of all. What is the Museum of Other People about? *What is it a museum of?* In 1988, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London commissioned six posters that advertised the V&A as: 'An ace caff, with quite a nice museum attached.' One poster asked: 'Where else do they give you £100,000,000 worth of *objets d'art* free with every egg salad?' What slogan might be blazoned on a poster to advertise the Museum of Other People in the twenty-first century? (Under a different name, it goes without saying.)